

THE BATTLE OF SEVEN OAKS

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SEVEN OAKS INCIDENT

June 19, 1816, is the date of the Seven Oaks Incident. History books refer to the Seven Oaks Incident as a massacre but the battle took place partly by accident and partly because the governor of the colony at that time, lacked good sense. This seemed to be about the only point that historians agree upon.

Biased feelings and prejudices have surfaced in some books and thus raise the question of how accountable their material and data is. An example of this arises in the 'The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company' by George Bryce. He said, "There was a scene of great rejoicing the same evening at the fort, the Bois Brules' being painted and dancing naked, after the manner of savages, to the great amusement of their masters."¹

Does some prejudice not show? Or is this merely a slip of the tongue?

To understand or even have a glimpse of what happened would be to condense all the different accounts and come up with a reasonable understanding of the Battle.

REASONS FOR THE BATTLE

The Metis, as with any other group of people who do battle, had some pretty fair and justifiable reasons for doing as they did. You must remember that Macdonnell, who was the first governor of the Selkirk settlers, had passed laws which defied and restricted the Metis lifestyles and traditions.

In the meanwhile the Nor'Westers, of the Northwest Company, were planting seeds of nationalism in the heads of the Metis. Saying the settlers' were there to take their land in the Red River and to interrupt the ways of the buffalo hunt, along with their age-old traditions.

At first the Metis saw no harm in the settlers being there but after the first year, in the area, the settlers were starting to starve and all through the years from 1812 to 1816 the failures of the crops due to floods, hail, drought, and early frosts made the settlers totally dependant on pemmican and consequently on the skills of the Metis hunters.

Surely there must have been other alternatives than what Macdonnell used. Yes, the Metis were mad when Macdonnell proclaimed that no food or provisions could be exported out of the Red River, but the straw that broke the camel's back were his next two laws. The first of the two being that no one would be allowed to hunt the buffalo on horseback. The second, that no one could hunt, fish or trap without permission from the governor of the colony. The Metis were enraged!

During the early part of 1816, the Nor'Westers' managed to arrange for Macdonnell's arrest and removal to Canada for trial. His successors were first Colin Robertson and then Robert Semple. Robertson didn't last long there, and Semple took over in his place.

Semple, in order to enforce the proclamation made by Macdonnell of restricting the export of provisions from the Red River, ordered a gunboat to patrol Lake Winnipeg and set up batallions of men along the river banks.



LES METIS

The Metis army was organized at Qu'Appelle, a Northwest Company post some 250 miles from Fort Douglas, by Alexander Macdonnell, a cousin of Miles Macdonnell.

At the head of fifty or sixty men, of whom four-fifths were Metis, Cuthbert Grant took charge with the aid of two captains named Micheal Bourassa and Antoine Houle. This band of men were under strict orders not to alarm the Red River settlers or the occupants of Fort Douglas. The men were to make a wide detour of the Hudson's Bay Company buildings and meet the Montreal canoes on the river. There they were to unload the supplies from the canoes and put the pemmican supplies and provisions in the canoes. With the supplies from Montreal out of the canoes, they would then take them to the five hundred Northwest Company employees scattered from Portage La Prairie to Qu'Appelle to Lake Athabasca.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Macdonnell meanwhile, got wind of the precautions that were undertaken by Semple. He sent word to Grant and his men to proceed to the rear of Fort Douglas so as to avoid meeting any people there.

As the men advanced peaceably, they circled a swamp called La Grenouillere. This name was to be the name given to the Battle by the Metis and French Canadians.

A lookout from Fort Douglas spotted the Metis from his post and immediately gave the alarm to Semple. Semple then assembled twenty-eight men to ride out to meet the Metis.

The Northwest men were scattered and a group of twenty-three men and Grant were isolated from the rest of his band. Grant and his group met Semple and his group by a clump of oak trees. Hence the name for the battle used by the English was the "Seven Oaks Massacre".

A spokesman for the Metis, one Francois Boucher, rode forth to parley. The air was thick with tension, everywhere it was silent except for the movements and the snorting of a horse.



THE FIRST SHOT

In a predicament such as this confrontation, the shooting of the first shot is usually the sign of who starts the battle. Here history is unsure. Historians seem to contradict themselves in regards to the "first shot".

"Coltman's report admits of no doubt. The first shot, that he attributed to an accident, came from Semple's regiment."

Another passage reads: "At this junction a shot was fired from some part of the line, and the firing became general. Many of the witnesses who saw the affair affirmed that the shot first fired was from the Bois Brules' line."

Regardless of who fired the first shot, the event happened as it always happens when tempers and passions are aroused.

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Francois Boucher was sent to find out what was going on. Semple and the Metis spokesman argued. Semple ordered his men to arrest Boucher and tried to seize his gun. A shot rang out and Semple ordered his men to fire.

As this meeting took place, the Metis were fanning out in a half-moon and seemed intent on circling Semple and his men. Semple must have seen this and, realizing his plight, tried to get Boucher's gun. Semple, as soon as he heard a shot, yelled, "Fire!" almost immediately.

Shots were exchanged on both sides. The Metis, who were true children of the prairie and great shots, took cover behind their horses, and from these advantageous points, proceeded to shoot with accuracy.

Even though Semple's men outnumbered the Metis, they refused to take shelter and were out in the open. The result of this action was that Semple and twenty of his men were killed. In the party of the Metis, one man died and four were wounded.

MASSACRE? OR BATTLE?

This is the story that has been distorted resulting in placing the blame upon the Metis who, though somewhat brutal as they were, should not accept the whole responsibility of the event.



Cuthbert Grant

Who can refuse to admit that if the Metis were not the victims of the conquerors, then they were the pawns of circumstance and chance of the Northwest Company.

One can only assume that chance and circumstance, aided by the follies of men such as Macdonnell and Semple, culminated into a battle that would mar Metis history for all time. We can say that the Metis as a Nation were not involved, and only some individuals were involved.

A NATURAL RESULT

The Northwest Company was overjoyed! They succeeded in breaking their competitors and captured Fort Douglas without a shot. They found themselves in complete control of the Red River.

The Battle of Seven Oaks brought the Northwest Company success but it also was their downfall. In a year the governor-general of British-North America, appointed two commissioners to inquire into the details of the tragedy. One of these commissioners went alone to the Red River.

He reported that Semple and his men were clearly at fault and that henceforth the Imperial Authorities in London would govern the colony. He also stated that each company should return to its original fort.

But the biggest change he recommended was, "...that the two companies merge."

Though it took four years to materialize, the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company merged into one and called the Hudson's Bay Company. The day was March 26, 1821.

WHAT IS LEFT?

Though the Metis were the victors in the Battle of Seven Oaks, after the companies had merged the Metis were forced to join the ranks of the unemployed, as a result of the battle four years before.

What remains today to remind us of this battle is a statue in Winnipeg commemorating the ones who died, namely Semple and his men. What there is for the Metis is a song written by Pierre Falcon, describing the battle. A remembrance from when the Metis first considered themselves a Nation.

SONG WRITTEN BY PIERRE FALCON

Come, listen to this song of truth,
A song of brave Bois Brules',
Who at Frog Plain took three captives,
Strangers come to rob our country.
Where dismounting there to rest us,
A cry is raised, "The English!
They are coming to attack us."
So we hasten forth to meet them.

I looked upon their army,
They are motionless and downcast;
So, as honour would incline us,
We desire with them to parley.
But their leader, moved with anger,
Gives the word to fire upon us;
And imperiously repeats it,
Rushing on to his destruction.

Having seen us pass his stronghold,
He has thought to strike with terror
The Bois Brules' — Ah! mistaken,
Many of his soldiers perish.

But a few escaped the slaughter,
Rushing from the field of battle;
Oh, to see the English fleeing!
Oh, the shouts of their pursuers!

Who has sung this song of triumph?
The good Pierre Falcon has composed it,
That his praise of these Bois Brules'
Might be evermore recorded.

FOOTNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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2. The History of the Metis Nation in Western Canada. Abridged and translated by Eugene Thomas from the original of Auguste-Henri Tremaudan. pg 72
3. The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company, by George Bryce. pg 232
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